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A Mental Training Tool: Implementing an Effective Mental Skills Training Program

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Implementing an effective mental skills training program can be a daunting task. Often coaches do not have the luxury of hiring a sport psychologist or mental trainer to develop and implement their program. Coaches considering developing their own program are often plagued by questions like: How do I convince athletes that mental training is worthwhile? What elements do I include in the program? How do I encourage and support athletes as they develop their mental skills? This paper attempts to address these questions and to offer coaches some practical strategies and ideas for implementing an effective mental skills training program.

How do I convince athletes that mental training is worthwhile?

There are several strategies that coaches can employ to "sell" athletes on the importance of mental training.

- ☑ Biographical/autobiographical accounts
- ☑ Media
- ☑ Guest speakers

Biographical/autobiographical accounts

Nothing emphasizes the importance of mental skills training more to athletes than hearing or reading other athletes' stories. These stories can provide that extra incentive or create an image in the athletes' minds of what is possible and what they need to be able to do to get there. There have been numerous books written by and about successful athletes that can lend some insight into how mental training plays a role in elite athletes' development. Recently, Orlick and Partington (2000b) published a book on-line called *Psyched: Inner Views of Winning*. The book contains transcripts from 19 interviews with Canadian Olympic athletes. In each interview, athletes discuss their mental preparation and the role it played in their Olympic pursuits and accomplishments. It is a wonderful tool, offering excellent sport specific examples regarding the application of mental training.

Media

Another strategy that can be an effective selling tool is to ask athletes to search the media such as newspapers and magazines for examples of mental skills used by elite athletes. This task can act as a spring board for discussing with athletes, either in a group or individually, the mental aspects necessary to be successful in their sport. Athletes may be surprised by the number of examples that they are able to find and, in turn, this exercise may act as a source of motivation for them to begin engaging in their own mental training program.

Every day, in the sport section of most newspapers, there are excellent examples of the mental side of sport. From Donovan Bailey to Serena Williams, one does not have to look very far. Here are just two examples I recently found:

It's the state of your mind that is paramount in sprinting. And your mind can break your body down. I put myself in a position where I am prepared to do everything to be healthy and run fast. When I get ready, I work really hard and focus on the specific task that I have. When there is chaos around me, I stay calm. I'm not sure where that comes from inside me, but I learned that a long time ago. And it paid off. In Atlanta, when I won the gold, there were all those false starts. I don't even remember them. I just focused on what I had to do (Donovan Bailey, 2000).

I refer to my notes to keep myself focused. I'm trying to work really hard on staying focused and not losing anything so I won't look out into the crowd. If you see something your mind is able to perceive, then you'll be able to take it in and eventually do it...They're reminders of what I need to do in my game...On the court sometimes I forget, but if I sit down and look at them I'll pick one or two out and really do it in the next game (Serena Williams from Richer, 2000).

The Olympics provide an additional opportunity for athletes to witness the importance of mental training. I highly recommend encouraging athletes to find examples of the mental side of sport as they witness the various events and hear about the athletes' extraordinary journeys. The Olympics are also a great opportunity to begin to develop a video library that contains a variety of clips about athletes' struggles, challenges and triumphs, and the strategies that they employed in order to endure and excel. As the Olympic athletes partake in numerous interviews and the media engross us in poignant athlete profiles, there are ample opportunities to capture on tape examples of the mental side of sport.

Guest Speakers

Guest speakers are another great source for highlighting the prevalence and importance of mental skills in sport. Sport psychologists, mental trainers, motivation speakers, well known coaches, former high performance athletes are simply a few examples of individuals who can be brought in to speak with athletes about mental training. Encouraging past athletes who have experienced the same, or a similar, program to speak about their journey can be a particularly meaningful experience for young emerging talent. It also provides another way for elite athletes to give back to the program and inspire others to make that commitment to excel.

Even though there are a number of ways to excite athletes about mental skills training, inevitably there will be athletes who place little merit on the mental side of sport and are not willing to try, or engage in, any mental training. It is important not to force these athletes to participate. Mental skills training is only effective when there is a commitment and belief on the part of the athletes - the commitment to practicing and applying the mental skills and the belief that these exercises can and will contribute to their development. Athletes who are resistant to the process may eventually come around as they see the development of their peers or they may simply choose to develop other avenues as an athlete. The important element is that the choice is theirs and that choice is respected.

What elements should I include in a mental training program?

Many of us are aware of the different types of methods associated with mental training such as imagery or goal setting. However, often it is effective to have a model to direct the implementation process. A framework can help ground a mental training program in the fundamental elements of mental excellence and focus the application of such methods as imagery or relaxation.

One of the more prominent models emerging as a guide to excellent performance is offered by Dr. Terry Orlick (2000). Orlick has consulted with many great performers in different areas of expertise from athletes to astronauts. Through his experiences and interactions, seven key components of personal excellence have emerged, and these areas have provided the defining elements of what he calls "the Wheel of Excellence".

The two central components of the wheel are **commitment** and **belief**, and they form the heart of the structure. To excel at anything, Orlick has found that performers need to dedicate themselves to their goals; work hard, especially in the face of adversity; and believe in themselves, their surroundings and their path. The five remaining elements contribute to the ability to be able to achieve commitment and belief, acting as the spokes of the wheel that guide excellence. These five elements include.

- ❑ **Full focus** - the ability to connect with, attend to, and focus completely on the appropriate elements when necessary
- ❑ **Positive images** - the ability to experience or re-experience feelings, sensations, actions or skills that are essential for the desired performance
- ❑ **Mental readiness** - the ability to consistently create, adjust and carry the most effective mental state into a performance situation
- ❑ **Distraction control** - the ability to maintain or regain the appropriate focus and state when faced with distracting elements, obstacles and/or feedback.
- ❑ **Constructive evaluation** - the ability to effectively analyze performance and draw out valuable lessons that will facilitate future development.

The model provides an effective guide with respect to the essential elements involved in a mental training program. With a solid framework in place, the next task then becomes deciding which elements to focus on during the implementation of the program. This assessment process involves two key steps:

- A. Assessing the needs of the athletes
- B. Determining the psychological demands of the sport.

A. Assessing the needs of the athletes

Athletes will vary in their mental strengths and areas for improvement. In order to develop an effective program, those strengths and areas for improvement need to be identified, and the

program, developed around those needs. Assessment of athletes' needs can occur in several ways. Ultimately, coaches should utilize a few different types of strategies in order to enhance the accuracy of the assessment process.

- ☑ Observations
- ☑ Interviews
- ☑ Questionnaires
- ☑ Sport psychologists and mental trainers

Observations

Systematic observations of athletes in practice and game situations over a period of time can lend some insight into behaviours that may either be contributing to, or detracting from, athletes' performances. Developing a checklist of potential behaviours in different situations can be a valuable tool that allows for quicker recording. Be careful not to try and interpret the behaviour as often athletes' actions can be misleading. Observations should be used in concert with other assessment procedures to gain a clearer understanding of the athletes' strengths and areas to work on.

Interviews

Interviewing athletes regarding their perceptions of their mental strengths and areas to work on can help the coach interpret or reinterpret athletes' behaviours appropriately or shed some light on aspects of which the coach may or may not have been aware. It also promotes a more athlete-centered approach, giving athletes input into their areas of development. Coaches can structure the interviews and ask each athlete the same questions, or simply have one or two questions prepared and then let the athletes take the interview in the direction they choose.

Questionnaires

Questionnaires can also be a valuable source of information for coaches, assuming that the athletes take the time to complete them honestly and openly and that the coach creates a safe enough environment for athletes to feel comfortable enough to do so. Recently, Partington and Orlick (2000b) and Orlick and Partington (2000a) developed the Mental Training Exercises (MTE 1 and 2). Each exercise contains a series of questions that provide a valuable reflective opportunity for the athletes, allowing athletes to highlight their current sport specific mental strengths and target their own areas for improvement. The appeal of these exercises is that they are athlete-centered and goal oriented. A word to the wise when using questionnaires. Athletes do not like to feel like they are being tested. Indeed, many mental training consultants have shied away from the use of psychometric testing with athletes. Therefore, only use or develop questionnaires that are relevant and meaningful and that serve to cover the intended areas of interest.

Sport Psychologists and Mental Trainers

Be aware of the strengths and limitations of each assessment procedure as well as the limitations of one's knowledge base in the area of mental training. Sport psychologists and mental trainers are trained specifically in assessment strategies and procedures and can act as valuable resources during this process by either helping with the development of the assessment tools or actually carrying out the assessment process.

B. Determining the Psychological Demands of the Sport

Each sport has different psychological demands that can affect the skills and mental preparation that are required in order for athletes to be successful. Jim Taylor (1995), a prominent mental training consultant from the United States, has identified several unique physical, technical and logistical demands in sport which require special preparation by the athletes involved. Here is a brief summary of the demands identified by Taylor:

Sport Demands	Sport Examples
Explosiveness vs. endurance	Sprint cycling vs. marathon running
Fine vs. gross motor skills	Shooting vs. power lifting
Short duration vs. long duration of activity	100-meter sprint vs. golf game
One performance vs. multiple performances	Speed skating vs. decathlon

These demands not only serve to differentiate sports but also affect the type of mental preparation athletes undertake. Focus, arousal and confidence levels necessary to be successful for the different types of sports will vary slightly depending on the demands. When implementing a mental training program, understanding these demands and balancing them with the athletes' needs can help coaches determine which mental training areas should be focused on first.

How do I encourage and support athletes as they develop their mental skills?

When implementing a mental training program, coaches should consider how to best facilitate athletes' learning. The best way to implement an effective mental training program is to create an environment where athletes are encouraged, supported and challenged to develop their mental training strategies in concert with their physical, technical and tactical strategies. An active learning environment, such as this, has five main characteristics:

- ☑ Self-directing
- ☑ Meaningful
- ☑ Accommodating
- ☑ Reflective
- ☑ Social

Self-directing

Ultimately, athletes should be responsible for their own learning. However, in order for them to achieve this, they need to be encouraged to identify their strengths and areas for improvement, issues and directions, as well as their goals and objectives on a regular basis. Athletes need to be provided with opportunities to determine their own learning needs, establish how those needs can be met and access information which will help them meet those needs. Suggested activities and exercises include:

1. Daily journals
2. Questionnaires
3. Group discussions
4. Individual meetings
5. Practical resources
6. Contact with sport psychologist or mental trainer

Meaningful

Athletes will desire knowledge, strategies and experiences that relate to them. They will need to experience sport specific examples, exercises and problems and be provided with practical strategies that they can use easily in practice. Examples, exercises and problems should be built directly into practice and competition times. As well, there should be opportunity for athletes to practice various mental training elements on their own or outside the practice and competition environment. A few suggested activities and exercises include:

1. Identification of key elements to focus on during an activity
2. Focus shifting exercises
3. Sport specific concentration exercises
4. Cue word development for new and modified skills
5. Visual rehearsal before performing skills or drills
6. Deep breathing exercises before executing a difficult maneuver
7. Video clips of successful performances
8. Contact with sport psychologist or mental trainer

Accommodating

Not all athletes learn the same way or at the same rate and pace, therefore exercises and examples should be presented in different ways and in different forms to allow the athletes to examine them from multiple perspectives. Suggested activities and exercises include:

1. Video clips
2. Audio clips
3. Pen and paper activities
4. Hands-on activities
5. Guest speakers
6. Discussion groups
7. Contact with sport psychologist or mental trainer

Reflective

All activities, exercises and problems should encourage athletes to be reflective and aware of their own thinking and learning process. Athletes develop awareness when they are challenged to reflect on feedback and correct and define their responses. It is the process of reflection and how athletes come to view and incorporate the new information within the context of their lives that promote development. Suggested exercises and activities include:

1. Athlete journals
2. Questioning and probing for understanding during practice times
3. Opportunities for athletes to justify and explain their performance
4. Constructive evaluation opportunities, either one on one or in a group
5. Systematic evaluation strategies, highlighting positives in performance and possible adjustments required
6. Contact with sport psychologist or mental trainer

Social

Athletes should be provided with opportunities to discuss and share their ideas with respect to mental training and its implementation. Through social interactions often ideas and concepts are elaborated upon and insights developed. Indeed, insights often develop in group discussions that may not have previously existed or come about otherwise. Furthermore the opportunity to discuss experiences can act as a motivating factor for athletes to learn mental skills. Suggested activities include:

1. One on one discussions
2. Group discussions on particular topics
3. Panel discussions with experts
4. Contact with sport psychologist or mental trainer

In sum, in order to implement an effective mental training program, coaches need to consider ways to create an environment that is self-directing, meaningful, accommodating, reflective and social in order to engage the athletes in active learning. Several ideas have been suggested and there are many more possibilities. In general, coaches should view implementation of the program as a process, not only for the athletes as they explore the various methods and strategies, but also for the coaches as they adapt and refine their approach. Coaches can take steps to enhancing this process by evaluating the program and its effectiveness on a regular basis. This evaluation process can be achieved through athletes' feedback, personal reflections and observed changes in behaviours and performances. Coaches can also enhance their program by seeking professional development opportunities to develop and expand their competence in the area of mental training. Workshops, individual sessions with a sport psychologist or mental trainer, books, articles and the World Wide Web are a few ways to develop one's ability and skill.

Conclusion

The goal of this paper has been to begin to address some common questions coaches may have about implementing a mental training program and to provide some practical strategies to assist in this endeavour. In general, it is essential to first "sell" athletes on the idea of mental training by having them discover its importance through books, media sources and guest speakers. Next, the program should be grounded in a sound mental training model that will help direct and focus the methods and strategies to be employed. Subsequently, the needs of the athletes and the demands of the sport should be assessed and considered when deciding on the mental training elements to focus on initially. Finally, the practice and competition environments should engage the athletes in active learning of mental skills by allowing them to direct and reflect upon their own learning through meaningful exercises and examples that accommodate their individual learning styles and engage them in opportunities to share their experiences.

It takes a concerted effort to develop an effective mental training program. Be patient, experiment with different strategies, evaluate the process, develop knowledge and ask for feedback from experts in the field. Every step is an important step when the goal is to help athletes pursue their dreams.

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